

13. God loves us, showing us the way

Why do so many of our faults or habits never get corrected, or they get worse, even if we confess them every time, or we discuss them assiduously with those who guide us? Perhaps it's because we think that the problem is one of only "paying the fine", instead of finding once again the direction of the right path — the correct road — in order to progress towards the goal.

When we have taken a wrong turning, sometimes the electronic navigation system has to ask us to go back a few kilometres, in order to refind the correct and most direct road, because we have left somewhere behind us the best access to the motorway! It takes humility, and patience, accepting the apparent "regression", in order to be able afterwards to go ahead faster and more securely.

One may think in this sense of the various penitential measures that St. Benedict offers for the guilty, unruly, rebellious (and especially proud) brothers. Even excommunication, the temporary distancing from the communal practices of the community, we have to understand is really just like a turning back from our presumptuous autonomous ways, that have distanced us from the way of life, in order to retake eventual reinsertion on the master road of the community, that brings us truly to the fulfilment of our life and vocation. When one has taken the wrong road, and one finds oneself in the midst of obscure country tracks, it is useless to start running at 150 km per hour to catch up on the lost time and wasted effort. It takes humility to slowly go back, attentive to the indications of a guide, in order to find once again the precise point at which we strayed from the correct road.

Even superiors must have this awareness, and this patience. It just doesn't do to claim that a "lost" brother or sister make a jump or a flight as the crow flies from the country road to the highway! When certain superiors tell me of such a monk or nun who had once gone a little astray that suddenly becomes fine and does everything well just like the others, and there are no more problems...little do I believe it! Sure, the grace of God can work miracles, but even Jesus with His disciples had the patience to let them make a journey and accompany them on it, respecting their freedom and the secret and mysterious work of the Holy Spirit, who knows how to take advantage also of any skidding or deviations, in order to lead our souls back toward the right destination.

Also in the fifth step of humility, after the quotation of Psalm 36 that advises us to reveal to the Lord our ways in order to entrust ourselves to Him, St. Benedict immediately adds another quotation taken from Psalms 105 and 117: "Confess to the Lord, because He is good, for His mercy endures forever" (RB 7:46; Ps 105:1 and 117:1). It is the only place in chapter 7 on humility where St. Benedict makes use of the word "mercy". This means that when we rely and entrust our path to God, sound or lost as we may be, it is to the mercy of God that we entrust it; and it is precisely

the mercy of God that brings and keeps us on the right road, that road that leads towards the destiny of life.

There is no greater mercy than that helping us to refind the right direction in life's journey. Still in chapter 27, the sheep that the Good Shepherd seeks and retrieves is the lost sheep: "*ovem quae erraverat*" (RB 27:8). The word error rightly comes from "*errare*", which means to wander, to lose one's way ("to err").

The Lord loves us, showing us the way, and if He must correct us, He does not do so with a punishment, but by correcting the road we travel, showing us the right path, leading us towards it, accompanying us along it.

He who is lost, he who wanders without knowing where he goes, or goes even towards his own ruin, what greater love can he experience if not that of being helped to reorientate himself, of finding the right path? He who has lost his way is alone, unhappy and afraid. There is no greater joy for him than that of being joined by someone who might show him this right road, and therefore setting him free from the loneliness, sadness and fear. Maybe he will have much effort still to expend in order to return. But if he knows that now his every step follows the right road, his labour is no longer sad, it is no longer fearful. He who returns home is happy walking, in running, in expending great effort in order to reach the goal.

I insist on this because it is an essential point in the Rule of St. Benedict. St. Benedict clearly conceives the Rule as an aid to listen and to follow the signs of God, of Christ, of the Holy Gospel, in order to follow the way of life all the way until reaching eternal life itself (cf. RB Prol 20; 72:12).

It is beautiful to meditate on the various qualifications of the "way of life" (Prol. 20) that the Rule proposes to us. It is, as we have seen, "the way of the tent" of God, that is of the dwelling with Him, of communion with Him (Prol. 24); it is the "way of salvation" (Prol. 48); "the way of God's commandments" (Prol. 49) and "the way of obedience" in order to go to God (RB 71:2).

How quickly the idea of obedience, of being commanded, becomes positive when one understands that thus it is given to us to accept the love of a God-Shepherd who leads our lives on the path of fullness, saving us from the loneliness, the sadness and the fear of he who is lost!

Psalm 24, like so many other psalms, throws light on this aspect of God's mercy. For this, the psalmist above all implores: "Show me, Lord, your ways, teach me your paths. Guide me in your faithfulness and instruct me, for you are the God of my salvation" (Ps. 24:4-5).

The Psalmist then praises the Lord precisely because He indicates the right road: "The Lord is good and just, He shows sinners the right way, He guides the humble

according to justice, and teaches them His way. All the paths of the Lord are love and faithfulness for he who keeps His covenant and his statutes." (Ps. 24:8-10)

This awareness that the love of God, and the merciful salvation that come from Him, are expressed above all in directing us towards the right way and in guiding us along it, is fundamental to the understanding and living of our relationship with the Lord in truth and happiness, in order not to reduce it to something lifeless; static and sterile.

And from this awareness comes also our maturity and fruitfulness. I think of Psalm 50, the *Miserere* of King David, pleading for mercy because of his great sin, with humility and contrition, but also understanding that the fruit of God's mercy toward him must also be *his* mercy towards others, a mercy that reproduces for others what the Lord does with us: showing us the path that leads us back to Him. Indeed, David promises: "I will teach the lost your ways and sinners will return to you" (Ps. 50:15).

In this way one becomes "merciful like the Father" (Lk 6:36): showing other lost souls and sinners the very way through which God has lead us back to Him.